

# Foreign Policy Challenges in the 1980s

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*Following is an address by J. Brian Atwood, Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, before the 11th annual National Student Symposium sponsored by the Center for the Study of the Presidency in Washington, D.C., on April 12, 1980.*

Much has transpired since the Center for the Study of the Presidency was established in 1969. The decade of the 1970s saw profound change in the institutional relationships among the three branches. The very fabric of our system was stretched thin during this decade under the pressures of Vietnam and Watergate. But when the dust settled, our Constitution had been resoundingly reaffirmed.

The legislative actions and legal rulings made in the 1970s restated our nation's commitment to collective decisionmaking under a strong but accountable Chief Executive. For the most part, the purpose of these reforms was to strengthen the Congress, not to weaken the Presidency. Congress forced itself by law to share responsibility for the most important governmental decisions and for national policy.

Each of us will assess from our own perspective whether the renaissance of Congress has improved the policy product. I believe that congressional involvement has added important legitimacy to the foreign policy initiatives we have undertaken. We are never stronger—never more unified in the eyes of the outside world—than when Congress and the President stand together. It has also been important to incorporate more systematically the public view into our decision process and

to assure that whatever course we follow generates the support needed to carry through.

We have a more democratic system in 1980—one which, on the foreign policy front, has demonstrably worked. Over the past 3½ years, we have gone to the Congress to ratify the Panama Canal treaties, to approve aircraft sales to our Middle East friends, to lift the embargo on Turkey, and, generally, to support our policies around the world. Despite the political burden these issues created for our elected representatives, the difficult decisions were made. It would be easy to rest on the laurels we earned in the decade of the 1970s. But the man who talked about eternal vigilance was correct. A democracy does not survive by looking back.

I would like to share some thoughts with you today about the future—the future of our governmental system, our political process, and the international challenges we face. Never in my lifetime have these challenges been greater, and never in my lifetime have so many doubts been raised about our ability to respond adequately.

I did not live through the great depression, but I sense from a reading of history that the American people understood that challenge. And we possessed the leadership and national will to meet it. I was born during World War II. We had no doubts about our objective then, and we made the sacrifices necessary to defeat the forces of oppression.

These national battles—one economic, one military—were characterized by relatively stark political choices.

There was not always agreement on means during the depression, but the ends were clear: We had to find ways to stimulate the economy, to create work for our people. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, it was no longer relevant to debate the merits of involvement versus neutrality. Our political options were cast in blacks and whites; the choices were rather obvious in retrospect.

In 1980 we can no longer depend upon pure assertions of military strength, economic dominance, or political superiority. We simply do not possess the leverage to dominate world affairs and overwhelm our potential adversaries. We are not without resources—we remain the most powerful nation on Earth. But we are also more vulnerable today; more dependent on foreign oil, susceptible to external economic pressures; threatened by the proliferation of nuclear weapons, pollution, and population; and subject to terrorist attack, by individuals and even governments.

Can we cope with these new realities? Can our political system generate the leadership we need? Can our government produce the tough decisions—the unpopular choices among unattractive options? Are we mature enough to recognize that we may on occasion be victimized by erroneous perceptions?

In his book *Public Opinion*, written 30 years ago, in a less complicated era, Walter Lippmann discussed the simplified judgments the public makes about the outside world. He worried that “the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance.” And he said that elected officials, particularly in matters involving foreign policy, tended to make the “big mistakes that public opinion insists upon.”

Lippmann, in my view, has been proven overly pessimistic. Our nation has produced its share of courageous leaders, and our people have invariably responded—sometimes in blind faith alone—to the exigencies required by international crises. But Lippmann’s warnings cannot be ignored, especially now as we attempt to cope with a world which is even more complex, even more fleeting than that which inspired his pessimism.

The American people are no longer as confident of their future or of their ability to accommodate to the accelerating change which is all about us. There is a natural tendency to retreat to preconceived perceptions of a more structured, neater world. The products of change

are so threatening to many of us that we attempt to deny their very existence. An increasing number of our citizens see the world as a madhouse; and we are closing off fact in favor of fantasy.

Simple solutions pervade our political discourse nowadays, and there seems to be dangerously little willingness to try to explain the complexities. There is a growing tendency in the United States to appeal to fear rather than hope to challenge the patriotism and good will of those who are attempting to struggle with the new realities, and to once again put aside basic American values to adopt the tactics of our adversaries. I see Congress as beginning to reflect this trend, and it worries me deeply.

## SALT II

The SALT II Treaty is perhaps the most prominent victim of this move toward simplicity. The political perception that developed over SALT II had little to do with the treaty itself. SALT was shelved—hopefully temporarily—by a sophisticated, well-financed public relations effort designed to frighten the American people.

The SALT Treaty was only a secondary target of this right-wing attack. The primary aim was to destroy détente; a policy which, it was said, was causing the American people to grow lethargic about the Soviet threat.

Soviet military adventures in Africa, Cuba, and eventually Afghanistan, were cited to demonstrate that the Russians could not be trusted to abide by a SALT Treaty. It didn’t seem to matter that trust was not required; we can monitor Soviet forces to assure compliance. Our military experts testified that *no militarily significant change in Soviet strategic forces* could occur without being detected by the United States early enough to respond. We could even drop SALT if serious cheating occurred.

SALT is in our interest; it is not a favor to the Soviets. The treaty does not constrain the United States in any way from proceeding with its strategic modernization program. We can build the cruise missile, the MX, and the Trident while Soviet forces are constrained much more stringently.

More importantly, the two superpowers are able under SALT to manage their strategic relationship rationally. Rules are established to reduce uncertainty and enhance stability. The awesome threat of nuclear war is contained under these procedures, permitting work to go on toward the ultimate goal—the elimination of nuclear weapons.

SALT II is even more important

when tension exists in our relationship with the Soviets, as is now the case. In these times, the probability is much greater that a fateful miscalculation will be made.

Yet, the political realities of 1980 dictate that SALT cannot be considered. The U.S. Senate has its ear to the ground. If its members keep listening for reaction rather than making the effort to talk sense to the public, we could well make “the big mistake public opinion insists upon.” Let us hope that the current condition is not permanent, and the result not fatal.

## World Economy

On the economic side, our nation faces severe inflation generated in large part by energy costs. The politics of the inflation problem could well lead us to turn our backs on North-South problems at a time when the international economic scene totters toward absolute chaos.

The world’s financial system has suffered a number of serious shocks since the creation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). It has seemed remarkably resilient on the surface. But the system is straining greatly under the pressures. The commercial banking community, as was reported this week, no longer wants to accept the risks of extending loans to the oil-consuming countries of the Third World. Meanwhile, the energy bill for these poor countries has again nearly doubled over the past year. The total debt for non-OPEC countries has multiplied threefold since 1973.

Do we actually believe that our own country can sit back and watch while one sovereign nation after another goes broke? The political impact of these economic pressures is already being felt. A desperate nation will react like a desperate individual. And desperation is one ingredient an already chaotic world does not need.

At a time when noncommercial lending institutions—multilateral banks, such as the World Bank—are more crucial to economic stability than ever before, they are under a massive attack by an increasingly influential faction within the Congress. Two basic charges are levied: that funding through the banks is back-door foreign aid; and that the United States does not fully control the distribution of loans through the banks—thus, some of the money finds its way to unpopular governments, such as Vietnam.

Apparently, these two assertions are so politically charged, many mem-

bers have chosen to ignore the benefits of these programs to the United States.

- Ignored is the fact that for every dollar paid into these banks, the United States gets back about \$3 in exports and related growth.

- Ignored is the fact that 95% of our bauxite needs, 81% of our tin, and 97% of our cobalt are imported from these developing countries; and that more than half of every one of the vital raw materials we need for industrial purposes will be imported by the year 2000.

- Ignored is the fact that these banks are the major source of funding for the exploration and exploitation of non-OPEC oil reserves.

- Ignored are the economic consequences of wrecking the international lending institutions at a time when energy costs are up and world trade is down.

When the multilateral development bank authorization bill finally reached the floor of the House on March 5, it was gutted by amendments. Funding levels were reduced to the point that U.S. obligations could not be met. Next week a conference report will go back to the House with those levels restored. Will the House of Representatives make "the big mistake public opinion insists upon?" Or will someone stand up and talk sense to the American people?

## U.S. Self-Interest

It has been said that the United States is "no longer Gulliver in a world of Lilliputian states." The postwar world we helped to build has acquired any number of power centers with which we must deal. We must grapple with the people explosion which has more than doubled the world's population. We must work with three times as many sovereign states as existed in 1945. We must compete effectively, and we must learn to negotiate to protect our self-interest.

- That self-interest demands that we do our part in the battle against economic and political chaos.

- It demands that we seek to build a strong body of international law.

- It demands that we seek to curb the proliferation of nuclear weapons; and

- It demands that, as a nation, we insist upon the protection of fundamental human rights.

As George Bernard Shaw said, "A democracy cannot rise above the level of human material of which its voters are made." I think we Americans are made out of pretty rational human material.

But, too many in politics today are selling America short. Too many of our elected officials seem to have lost confidence in their ability to lead and influence. If this trend continues, no amount of institutional reform—such as that which occurred in the 1970s—will be sufficient.

We will always have our demagogues, but a viable democracy must also have its share of those who have confidence in the capacity of people to appreciate higher principle and to understand the realities, however unhappy they may be. We must have political leaders at all levels who possess the inner strength to attempt to change the public mind when they believe it to be misguided. And we need leaders who understand the new realities we face.

That is the challenge our system of government must address in the 1980s. ■

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